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**ETHIOPIA**

# FIRST PERSON

## A Woman at Risk Starts a New Life

**With outside help, young women who became sex workers can escape a dangerous life**



Photo: IOCC/Stefanos Roulakis

Fronyi Marese, who received financial assistance from a USAID-funded HIV/AIDS church program, now runs a small business.

***“Surviving was a big problem, I had no money to live,” said Fronyi Marese, who lost her parents when she was 7 years old.***

Fronyi Marese had no money and no one to turn to. She lost her parents when she was 7 years old, and since then each day was a struggle. “Surviving was a big problem... I had no money to live,” said Fronyi. At the age of 17, not knowing where to go, she turned to the only option that seemed available: trading

sex for money. She found the experience deeply humiliating. “I refuse to call it a life,” said Fronyi, recalling her three years as a sex worker in Adwa, Ethiopia. “It was very bad. I have no words to express my bad feelings.”

Fronyi’s life in Ethiopia’s dangerous sex industry began in a hotel. “I was hit and raped by the owners whenever they wanted,” she recalled tearfully. “I hardly made any money, because they made me pay for the room I used, and I had to give the owners a percentage, so really, all that was left was money for food.” Because she was not able to save money, and had no other skills or resources at her disposal to make an income,

Fronyi felt trapped. To make matters worse, given the nature of Ethiopia’s oppressive sex industry and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the sex industry, she also feared for her life. “I think many people who come to us are sick,” she said, implying that many of her clients probably carried the HIV/AIDS virus.

After three years, Fronyi found a way to escape the life she hated. Through a USAID-funded program aimed at preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS, Fronyi received \$200 to begin a small business. “When I heard her story, I knew we had to help,” said one of the program coordinators. Safe from the dangers of her old life, Fronyi now runs a small store.

The USAID-sponsored program is run in coordination with local church communities, who seek to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS by taking steps to eliminate the sex trade. Current estimates show that 1.5 million people in Ethiopia live with HIV/AIDS, and the disease claims 30 percent of all young adult deaths. But successes like Fronyi show that, with help and guidance, young women caught in the trap of this industry can break free and begin a new life.

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